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THE CURRENT: What does Shinzo Abe's assassination mean for Japan?

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

Former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was assassinated Friday at a campaign stop in Nara. With us today to discuss what's known so far about the shocking event, how Japan is responding, and the potential ramifications of this act is Mireya Solís, senior fellow and director of the Center for East Asia Policy Studies and Phil Knight chair in Japan studies. Mireya, thank you so much for talking to us. Really shocking day here, so thank you for joining us.

SOLÍS: Thank you, Adrianna. Yes, it is a very tragic set of events in Japan.

PITA: Yes, what can you tell us so far about what's known? This was one of the first killings of sitting or former head of state for Japan since 1936, before the war. What do we know about who the suspect was or why this was done?

SOLÍS: So we don't have, of course, the full information, but what we know is that the suspect was arrested and also the weapon that he used has been retrieved, so there is that information. And his house has also been searched by the police, who are also trying to ascertain what his motives might have been. And that's really what is left unknown.

From the very early reporting, there's not a lot of that makes sense, as to why he would commit this act. He doesn't seem to be providing very coherent statements, but that's something that now, of course, the police are going to be making full inquiries about.

PITA: Shinzo Abe was Japan's longest serving prime minister and he had stepped down back in 2020 due to some long running health concerns. What was this appearance in Nara for? Was he anticipating another return to politics himself or playing a supporting role for his party?

SOLÍS: Yes, you know he stepped down as prime minister, but he never left Japanese politics. So, Japan is having a very important election, national election, this coming Sunday for the upper House. And he was there supporting some of his fellow candidates; he was there to support another LDP candidate.

I think it's important to note that when Prime Minister Abe left, former Prime Minister Abe left office in 2020, he then became the leader of the largest political faction in his party. So it's not that he retired to a quiet life, an anonymous life, but actually he remained a potent political force inside the party. And he also was very vocal in his views about what Japan should be doing in terms of foreign policy, in terms of economic policy, so he was shaping the debate inside the party and inside the country about these topics. And he had great influence in party dynamics when it came to appointments, when it came

to pushing forward these debates, so this leaves a void in the party, because he had remained really influential politician inside Japan.

PITA: In the U.S., you know we're so used to having a really heavy security cordon, not only for our leaders, but in so much of everyday life from our schools to our stadiums, to how heavily armed our police forces regularly are. Japan has experienced its share of a violent crime or terrorist attacks, but guns are extremely rare. How do you see people reacting, and the Japanese leadership, to this attack?

SOLÍS: Everyone's stunned. This is not something that Japan has experienced in the past. Japan has very strict laws on gun ownership. Deaths by gunshot in Japan is extremely rare; I think that there was one case last year. And therefore, the weapon that was used – again, more information needs to be collected – but it seemed that it was a homemade device.

So people are stunned because also this happened during a stop for the electoral campaign. And this is something that has been the case in Japan, that when election season starts, politicians really go out in the street. And they are very close to the voters, and this is something that's very special about the way in which Japan's election campaigns happen. And much remains to be decided in the aftermath of this tragic event, this tragic shooting, but it's not inconceivable that the safety protocols could change and then what that would mean for that immediacy, that proximity, that the Japanese voter has had with its politicians that are trying to secure a seat in office.

So this again leaves the country very shocked, because I think that is also important to put in context that Japan has been a very stable country, remains a very stable country, a very safe country. It's not that this happened because we had been seeing a polarized country, deterioration in the fabric of Japanese democracy, the rise of armed and dangerous armed groups; nothing of this nature has been taking place in Japan. And therefore nobody was expecting something like this. And so far from what we know, and of course, we need to wait for more information, but it seems that it was this individual, with this homemade device, who is responsible for the assassination for former Prime Minister Abe.

PITA: Rather than a larger political movement or anything.

SOLÍS: On what we could gather, yes.

PITA: How do you foresee that changing something, if they do rethink the security protocols and start having to change this relationship that you talked about, about the Japanese politicians really getting to know the people, really mingling amongst the people, how do you foresee that changing that relationship potentially?

SOLÍS: It would perhaps be more distance between the candidates and the voters, greater security and safety protocols. But I also feel that this is something that's very important to the health of Japanese democracy. And I'm hoping that after the police analyze what transpired in this incident that the security protocols, in terms of having a perimeter for example, those can be tightened without giving up on the very important need for contact and proximity between candidates and voters.

PITA: You and I have talked of course in the past about Shinzo Abe's legacy back when he stepped down from being prime minister. Abe was a long running partner of the U.S. and Japanese relationship, including the development of the Quad, the India-U.S.-Australia-Japan relationship. His economic policies, Abenomics, sought to revitalize an economy that had had previously had long grown stagnant. How do you see this this shocking act shaping how we understand how we think about his legacy and, potentially, that of his political successors?

SOLÍS: Obviously Abe has been one of the most consequential leaders in Japanese post-war history. He is the longest serving prime minister. He implemented an ambitious program of economic revitalization, which had some successes and some failures, but where he really left his mark, first and foremost, was on foreign policy. He elevated Japan's leadership when it came to trade issues, infrastructure finance, digital governance to an extend that we had not seen before. We had seen a more passive Japan, and it was through his leadership. Of course, there were other, longer-term trends that he was capitalizing on that made his leadership so effective but, nevertheless, he took some very courageous steps in making sure that Japan could play in the big leagues on foreign economic policy. This was more important because this was a time when the United States had actually retreated inward when it came to international trade diplomacy.

And then, of course, on the security front, under his leadership Japan adopted national security legislation, changed the interpretation of the constitution to allow for a limited right of collective self-defense, deepened the security cooperation with the United States across many fronts. And relations with the closest neighbors, China and South Korea, were very complicated, but in Southeast Asia, he was very proactive very effective, and with India, for example, he really developed very close ties. So overall, I think that his contributions are manyfold.

I think that this tragic departure cuts short what he could have accomplished, again, not from the perch of the prime minister's office, but as a very influential leader inside the party. He had recently made statements, for example, on issues that had remained taboo, but by bringing them to the fore, he opened to discussion, for example, nuclear weapons and nuclear sharing, or his views about U.S. policy of strategic ambiguity vis-à-vis Taiwan. So he was pushing the envelope and that's no longer going to be the case.

Now many of his legacies will remain. We already know that his successors have seen them as really meaningful and consequential policies for Japan and therefore they're doubling down on them. Of course, with their own other set of agendas in place as well, but the free and open Pacific, the Quad, again, the infrastructure push, the CPTPP leadership, those things stay in place. And I think that what has happened now, of course, is that Abe-san, Prime Minister Abe, now becomes a really tragic figure in Japanese history, but also a very consequential leader that has left an indelible mark in Japan and that really changed the way in which Japan was seen as an influential country in the region and beyond.

PITA: All right. Well, of course, our thoughts and sympathies are with the Japanese people at this time. Mireya, thank you so much for talking to us about this today.

SOLÍS: Thank you, Adrianna, happy to have this conversation, thank you.